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TAGS: PGOV KDEM MI

SUBJECT: FIRST LADY ETHEL MUTHARIKA DIES

¶11. (SBU) First Lady Ethel Mutharika passed away on the afternoon of May 28 after a two-year bout with cancer. Mutharika passed away at home in Lilongwe's New State House with President Bingu wa Mutharika by her side. The Government of Malawi has announced a thirty-day period of mourning for the First Lady, and Parliament has adjourned indefinitely. Public viewings of the First Lady's body are being held at State House on May 29, and thereafter in Mzuzu and Blantyre before her State Burial Ceremony on June 9 in the President's home area of Thyolo.

¶12. (SBU) The First Lady's health has been the subject of wide speculation over the past few months, to the dismay of State House. The Government of Malawi's statement, released on May 29, that the First Lady had been suffering from cancer "over a period of two years" is one of the few acknowledgements of the extent of Mutharika's illness. Mutharika had sought treatment in both France and South Africa over the past two years.

¶13. (SBU) Ethel Mutharika, a Zimbabwean-born Malawian, had been married to President Mutharika for over thirty-seven years. She is best-known in Malawi for starting the Ethel Mutharika Foundation when her husband was elected president in 2004. The Foundation performed various charitable works aimed at the social development of Malawian women and children. The First Lady is survived by her husband and four children--two daughters who live in Malawi, and two sons who live abroad.

¶14. (SBU) Parliament indefinitely suspended its annual budget session upon the announcement of the First Lady's death on May 28. Parliamentarians, however, were told to remain in Lilongwe for the time being, leading many to believe that the crucial session will resume meeting shortly. The budget, which must be passed by Parliament, had been scheduled to be presented by the Minister of Finance on June 15 (the financial year ends June 30).

¶15. (SBU) Comment: Time will tell, but Ethel Mutharika's death could have a significant impact on President Mutharika and the direction of his presidency over the next two years. The First Lady was one of the few members of President Mutharika's inner circle, and many credit her with pushing the president towards the appointment of a number of female Ministers (including Minister of Health Marjorie Ngaunje, a personal friend of the First Lady's). Some speculate that with Ethel's death President Mutharika might lean more on his daughters (particularly Duwa Mutharika, who currently runs a local weekly newspaper) or his political advisors. However there is the possibility that Mutharika, already paranoid regarding his political opponents and isolated from forthright advisors, could turn even more insular with the loss of his life-long partner. End Comment.

REINTSMA